

Tumbleweed

Dave's hands shook slightly as he checked the numbers on his smartphone for the third time. He'd definitely won. He checked a fourth time – yup - he'd definitely won. Naturally, he'd daydreamed over the years what he would do, not just with the money, but also what he'd do at the very point of realising he'd won.

He didn't yell or punch the air as he thought he would, he simply repeated the words like a mantra – seven point two million, seven point two million pounds. A sensation rose in his chest, not unlike champagne bubbles rising in a glass – and there would be plenty of champagne, he thought. He sat there for a while, staring at the ticket, and the more he stared, the blurrier his eyes became – he realised he was crying. He would have to make a plan, he thought, but, first, he had to get through the evening. He would smile and try to act like the husband, father and grandfather he was. He photographed the ticket with his phone before snapping it shut, zipping himself up, pressing the toilet flush, taking care to put the lottery ticket in his shoe, before exiting the cubicle and re-joining the celebrations – his Ruby Wedding Anniversary.

Days earlier, and unbeknown to Dave, his two sons had taken their mother, Patty, into their confidence.

'Boys,' she said, 'you don't think it's a little cruel, do you?'

Simon and Joey just grinned at her. 'It'll be a right laugh,' they replied. 'Think of his face!' Simon and Joey didn't think about anything too deeply, of course. The twin apples of their mother's eye had had little need to, given that their every crisis, whether financial, romantic or legal was smoothed over by Patty, and a rather more reluctant Dave. Now, they would repay him with their grand practical joke.

Oh, how they laughed. For years, they had sniggered at their father's routines. His regular purchase of two lucky dips for the Saturday lottery; his insistence on using his phone to check the numbers precisely one hour after the televised draw, because to watch it would mean missing out on his evening soak in the bath, with the cryptic crossword.

They planned to rush out of the anniversary celebrations on Saturday, buy a ticket for the following week's draw using the winning numbers just announced and replace their father's ticket in his wallet with the new one, before he had a chance to check it – Dave would be a millionaire for one night only, and in his mind only, too.

Patty, swept up with her boys' enthusiasm did insist they come clean before the night was over though. 'He'll make a fool of himself,' she said. 'He'll be buying drinks for all and sundry and promising me diamonds and furs.'

And so it was, that when Dave returned from the gents after checking his ticket, Patty and her sons were eagerly awaiting his announcement. Dave stayed quiet, however, only asking Patty if she was enjoying the meal. Once the pudding was served, Dave went around the guests with a few words of welcome. They were mostly Patty's friends or his sons' in-laws; people he barely knew and didn't care to.

Someone called for a speech and forks tinkled against glasses for silence. Dave stood up and cleared his throat. Patty and her boys held their breath – surely, Dave would announce his lottery win now. Patty felt a little sorry for him, but he'd see the funny side, after all, boys will be boys.

Dave spoke of how a marriage should be a partnership in all respects. He told of how he and Patty had struggled during the early years; how money had been tight and jobs hard to come by. He smiled and said he had never regretted having children, though, even if this meant a greater sacrifice – then he sat down. The applause was muted – the women had wanted declarations of undying love; the men had anticipated sly jokes about balls and chains, and the grandchildren had expected at least a mention.

Patty's brain was whirring. Did he mean to keep his win a secret from her? I mean, he hadn't won a penny, but *he* didn't know that. She'd expected more of the man. What a crabby old sod! Just wait until they were home – she'd let him have what for. Meanwhile, she would have to keep up appearances – it was their Ruby wedding, after all. She fingered the ruby earrings he had presented her with – she'd have preferred a showy necklace and matching ring.

Simon and Joey were baffled at first, but soon became angry – the grumpy old bastard wasn't about to share his jackpot with his family, they thought, and even though there *was* no jackpot, bitter thoughts took shape until they could stand it no longer.

‘Checked you lottery ticket, Dad,’ they asked.

‘Yes,’ Dave replied, ‘No luck though – not even one number.’

The evening fell flat after that. Dave and Patty rode home in the taxi in silence. The boys hadn’t waved them off. Once home, Patty immediately asked, ‘Is there something you want to tell me, Dave.’

Dave opened his wallet in response. Taking out three notes, adding up to twenty-five pounds, he threw them on the bed and said, ‘Patty, buy yourself something nice with this. I had three numbers up tonight on the lottery.’

Patty drew in a breath large enough to carry her through her next explosion of words, but Dave put up a hand and said, ‘I checked *my* ticket *before* we went to the restaurant and I *saw* our Simon switch the tickets *after* I spotted you handing him my wallet. I also checked the *date* on the new ticket and wondered what I had done to deserve their, and your, cruelty.’

‘You knew!’ Patty said, biting her lip.

Dave took his suitcase from the wardrobe and threw in his pyjamas, ‘Patty,’ he said sadly. ‘I’ve always known.’

‘What is *that* supposed to mean?’ Patty yelled. ‘Oh, you never *could* take a joke. The boys were so disappointed. You are such a misery guts.’

Dave didn’t reply – the tumbleweed whistled through their forty-year marriage and out the other side. He picked up his case and left.

The hotel was cheap and shabby but it would do, he thought, sitting on the single bed. Tomorrow, he would look for a small flat to rent. He sent the photo of the fake ticket to Simon and Joey’s phones, with the caption; *great joke, Son*. It wouldn’t do to let them know the joke was on them.

He estimated a quickie divorce would take three months or so. That gave him plenty of time to stay within the 180 day limit of claiming his jackpot – with the “No Publicity” box duly ticked, of course. He took his winning ticket from his shoe – the one he’d been carrying around for over three weeks, now – and kissed it. Seven point two million reasons for leaving his family.